In this column we review a selection of children’s books focusing on characters and communities that connect and grow with one another through their courage and compassion.

Recent global events continue to reveal to us that prejudice, violence, upheaval, and environmental endangerment are not limited to any nation or group of people. Yet courage and compassion are often surrounding us, in places both obvious and subtle. As educators, “We frame what counts in the human community we construct with students” (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 13). Below, we feature books that offer multiple portraits of characters and communities who seek, discover, and embrace courage and compassion. These portraits represent different genres, occur in different contexts, and showcase different purposes and possibilities; yet they all emphasize qualities that enable characters to connect and communities to grow. As a new school year begins, we invite you to see how these books can help readers build connections and communities as well, and how courage and compassion can reverberate among them.

Reference

One Today
Written by Richard Blanco
Illustrated by Dav Pilkey

Blanco originally composed “One Today” for President Barack Obama’s second inauguration. In picturebook format, the poem celebrates the rich community ties within cities and towns across the USA. The text, written in an inclusive first-person narration, invites each reader to identify with the book personally. Only the illustrations tell a specific narrative: that of an elderly woman and two children going about their daily business in a multicultural city. Their single day becomes a metaphor for an entire year, their city a stand-in for the entire country. Within that day, Pilkey’s vibrant acrylic illustrations magically transition us through the four seasons, starting in spring and ending in winter. Many of the two-page spreads provide the reader with a snapshot of urban and rural landscapes, one leading into the other, affirming our wholeness. An homage to the words of Martin Luther King Jr. and Walt Whitman, this picturebook poem is appropriate for even the primary grades, telling us we are all “as vital as
the one light we move through,” and reminding us of the “I have a dream’ we keep dreaming.” It is a book that celebrates the art and music of everyday life, the joy our senses bring us as we move through our day, and the common needs, dreams, and aspirations that connect us as a people and a nation. (MAC)

I Used to Be Afraid
Written and illustrated by Laura Vaccaro Seeger

The power of courage and compassion is clear in this clever picturebook about overcoming one’s fears. While adults may marvel at how much of children’s behavior is marked by fearlessness, there is still much in a child’s world to dread, such as spiders, shadows, and making mistakes. With straightforward, predictable patterns, Seeger’s text spotlights specific sources of fear and, more important, emphasizes the power and achievement of overcoming them. Employing cleverly placed die-cuts, rich acrylic paintings, and vibrant collage techniques, Seeger’s illustrations reinforce the wonder, life, and possibilities that come with conquering one’s fears. In fact, the reason for overcoming each fear is not revealed in words, but conveyed solely through a double-page illustration. In keeping with many of her other concept picturebooks, Seeger concludes with a delightful twist on the message repeated throughout the book. Whether used as a read-aloud or as independent reading, I Used to Be Afraid will provide even our youngest students with much to ruminate about, including what makes them afraid and how amazing one’s experiences are when those fears are faced. (GE)

Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World’s Most Famous Bear
Written by Lindsay Mattick
Illustrated by Sophie Blackall

While readers may be familiar with the rotund, affable character of Winnie-the-Pooh, this exceptional picturebook introduces a new character, veterinarian Harry Colebourn, and the backstory of the “world’s most famous bear.” Using the framing device of a bedtime tale told by a mother to her son, Mattick describes her great-grandfather: “If a horse had the hiccups or a cow had a cough, Harry knew how to make them just right.” As World War I unfolds in Europe, Lieutenant Harry leaves his home in Winnipeg for Europe to care for the Canadian soldiers’ horses. In route by train, Harry encounters a bear cub and a trapper. Harry’s “heart made up his mind” and he purchases the cub, names her Winnie, and brings...
A Boy and a Jaguar
Written by Alan Rabinowitz
Illustrated by CáTia Chien

“The teachers think I am broken. Am I?” In A Boy and a Jaguar, Rabinowitz poignantly recounts the hardships he experienced throughout childhood, in and out of school, because of his stutter. He found connection not through his classmates or his teachers, but through animals. As a boy, he came home every day and went straight to his bedroom closet, where he brought out his array of pets, closed the door, and spoke to them—without stuttering. This picturebook memoir relays Rabinowitz’s life journey from childhood through his present-day advocacy for animals. Through simple prose, Rabinowitz describes his ensuing passion for wild animals and the adventures that took him to Belize, where he courageously used the power of his voice to advocate for the world’s first and only jaguar preserve. Chien’s acrylic and charcoal pencil-art illustrations vividly evoke the compassionate approach Rabinowitz has had throughout his life for all living things. This book encourages readers to look within, find their own voice, and use it, especially to help the voiceless. The book further reminds readers of all ages that though you may feel broken and experience disconnection in life, community can often be found in unlikely places if your heart is open. (KEC)

Seeds of Freedom: The Peaceful Integration of Huntsville, Alabama
Written by Hester Bass
Illustrated by E. B. Lewis

In 1962, while the aerospace industry thrives in northern Alabama, segregation continues to dominate everyday life. However, “change is in the air” and it is “[t]ime to sow the seeds of freedom.” These seeds are small at first—a lunch counter sit-in, small demonstrations. Nothing changes until Huntsville’s African American citizens decide they need publicity to enact change. Bass
Building Community through Powerful Characters

An A from Miss Keller
Written and illustrated by Patricia Polacco

Polacco’s picturebook recounts the formative influence of yet another teacher from her childhood. Young Trisha is both thrilled and intimidated to be among the select students invited to take Miss Keller’s writing course. Soon enough, the rumors about “Killer Keller” prove true. No matter what Trisha writes and how much effort she exerts, nothing pleases Miss Keller, who insists students “[d]azzle me. Impress me. Send me into ecstasy with your brilliance.” She even informs students, “You are going to work harder than you have ever worked in your entire miserable little lives.” An elderly neighbor, Pop, offers Trisha some solace and encouragement with tales of his own encounters with Miss Keller. In fact, a devastating turn of events prompts Trisha to produce an assignment that catches Miss Keller’s attention and brings the connection and compassion among all three people to the fore. Characteristically, Polacco’s sentimentality permeates the text and her pencil-and-marker illustrations, making this a valuable addition to her set of depictions of inspirational teachers. The assorted messages and examples about writing alone are enough to lend the book to many classroom applications. (GE)

Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement
Written by Carole Boston Weatherford
Illustrated by Ekua Holmes

As one of the most influential leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, it’s curious why Fannie Lou Hamer isn’t as familiar to students as other Civil Rights figures. This stunning picturebook biography, though, gives center stage to her and her many profound acts of courage. In lyrical, first-person free verse, Weatherford shares Hamer’s story, from her childhood as the youngest of 20 children in a family of sharecroppers toiling in Mississippi to her acceptance of a lifelong service award by the Congressional Black Caucus in...
1976 for her inspirational activism. Infused with song and factual details, Hamer’s voice resonates across each page with accounts of the daily injustices Black people faced, the intimidation and brutality she experienced, and the tenacity and hope with which she pursued freedom and justice for all. Holmes’s bold, vivid collage illustrations accentuate Hamer’s strength and humanity, while relaying the harrowing effects of racism around her. Informative back matter includes an author’s note, timeline, source notes, and bibliography. An honest and welcome perspective into this turbulent time in US history, Voice of Freedom is a must for all classrooms and curricula. (GE)

Malala: A Brave Girl from Pakistan/ Iqbal: A Brave Boy from Pakistan, Two Stories of Bravery
Written and illustrated by Jeanette Winter

Courage lies in people of all ages, but it is often children who are the most courageous among us. This book depicts two life stories represented as separate tales that symbolically meet in the middle. Through its clear, concise prose and vivid, digitally rendered art, the stories inspire readers of all ages to be brave even in the face of violence and destruction. The book can serve as a powerful introduction to the complex social and political events in Pakistan through the hopeful lens of two youth who are courageous and mature enough to speak out about injustices around them. Winter trusts readers to compassionately understand the courage of Malala and Iqbal, as well as the consequences of their courage that led to the attack on Malala and Iqbal’s death. In an emotional double-page spread, the two children share an imagined moment, flying kites atop a mountain. This image and the depiction of their life events serve as a reminder of the global community their stories help build. Winter reminds us that in the global fight for justice, equity, and peace, we are all Malala; we are all Iqbal. (KEC)

Emily’s Blue Period
Written by Cathleen Daly
Illustrated by Lisa Brown

Emily Rose Pincher loves art and is enthralled when introduced at school to the artistic styles of Pablo Picasso. Picasso’s cubist works resonate with Emily, whose dad is “no longer where he belongs” (p. 13). He has moved into an apartment several blocks away. Emily responds to her parents’ separation by entering her own blue period, expressing her sadness by refusing to participate fully in her art classes. While her emotional turmoil is expressed internally, Emily’s little brother Jack acts out, throwing a temper tantrum as they shop for Dad’s new home furnishings. After some time has passed, Emily responds to a new technique her art teacher has learned, and it offers her a medium to pull together all that’s important to her. She creates a “big and soggy and beautiful” (p. 47) heart-shaped collage, indicating “how you take things from different places to make a
whole” (p. 55). While Daly has structured Emily’s narrative in five short, titled chapters, this title falls squarely in the picturebook genre. Brown’s pencil-and-watercolor images bring Emily and her family to life while paying appropriate tribute to Emily’s mentor, Picasso. Varying perspectives highlight Emily and Jack’s viewpoints, and family dialogue is frequently expressed in speech bubbles. This direct and affecting story of Emily’s adjustment to changing circumstances highlights the healing power of artistic expression and advances a theme of resilience. (ETD)

**Lost in NYC: A Subway Adventure**
Written by Nadja Spiegelman
Illustrated by Sergio García Sánchez

Pablo is the new kid in school again, having moved frequently from one city to another for his father’s job. His first day of school in Manhattan is the same day as a class fieldtrip to the Empire State Building. Determined not to become friendly with anyone and describing himself as a “lone wolf,” Pablo withdraws from his peers. Acutely perceiving his underlying uneasiness and loneliness, his gregarious classmate Alicia attempts to befriend him. Though Pablo remains surly and aloof, Alicia persists in reaching out to him and even follows him when he mistakenly boards the express train instead of the local one, losing the rest of the class. Frustrated with everything, Pablo evades Alicia, leaving each to navigate the subway system alone to reunite with their class. Will Alicia’s compassion help Pablo find the courage to let down his guard and connect with a new city and a new friend? Intricately woven throughout this graphic novel adventure is a history of the iconic subway system and the legendary skyscraper, told with informative text, historical photos, and impressively intricate panels. This book is an exemplary marriage of text and illustration revealing a tale of compassion, courage, and connection told with fun and sensitivity. (GE)

**In the Footsteps of Crazy Horse**
Written by Joseph Marshall III
Illustrated by Jim Yellowhawk

Eleven-year-old Jimmy McClean is tired of being teased that his Scottish surname, blue eyes, and light hair hide his Lakota identity.
Wilhelmina Silver, better known as Will, is fittingly nicknamed Wildcat by her adoring father, an English foreman at Two Tree Hills Farm. Her fierce and fearless spirit soars on the Zimbabwe rural landscape she calls home. There she is connected to people, animals, and the vibrant terrain itself. She climbs trees; outruns and outrides her friends, the horseboys; and is free to trust her own instincts and decisions. When her father dies from malaria as her mother did, Will is sent away to boarding school in England and meets a harsh new reality. Zimbabwe was a land rooted by connection and community for Will, yet in the stark British school for girls, she finds nothing but disconnection and self-doubt. Her once courageous spirit is broken by classmates’ taunts and cruel antics, and she finds herself alone in unimaginable ways. Desperate for what seems like love, belonging, and remnants of her former life, Will’s resilience is tested as she navigates the challenges of her new surroundings.

However, Grandpa Nyles High Eagle informs him that Jimmy looks a lot like Crazy Horse, the famous Lakota leader who fought against US encroachments, particularly during the Battle of Little Big Horn. With that intriguing revelation, Jimmy embarks with his grandfather on a journey across the Plains states to learn about the honored hero. Each stop is a site that was critical to Crazy Horse’s growth into a historical icon, and Grandpa Nyles describes the events through dialogue and oral storytelling. Much of the account details the harsh battles between the US government and the Lakota people, but Marshall wisely eschews sensational details, emphasizing instead the courage of individuals and the complexity of war. More important, Marshall grounds Crazy Horse’s actions and achievements in the compassionate imperative for helping those in need, especially children and the elderly. Jimmy learns by the journey’s end that courage and compassion are intimately connected to heroism. An author’s note, glossary, and bibliography buttress this riveting tale of history and self-understanding. (GE)
of her former self, she escapes to wander the streets of London. Readers will be pulled in both by the story’s heightened pace once hardship strikes and by Will’s strong-willed heart. Rundell has crafted a character who dares readers to be brave, to cartwheel in thunderstorms literally and figuratively, and to embody Will’s spirit to be “wild and honest and true” (p. 2). (KEC)

A Handful of Stars
Written by Cynthia Lord
Scholastic, 2015, 192 pp., ISBN 978-0-545-70027-6

A Handful of Stars depicts complex relationships experienced in childhood. Lily is a determined and rather spunky twelve-year-old girl who lives with her grandparents in rural Maine. She is passionate about her dog, Lucky, and spends her free time painting mason bee houses to help fund the surgery needed to bring back his eyesight. When Lucky wanders off, he is assisted by Salma, a Latina migrant worker who works with her family picking blueberries in the local barrens. As Lily and Salma’s friendship develops, Lord sensitively addresses topics of prejudice, multiculturalism, and the social dynamics of our increasingly diverse society. In Lily, we meet a girl wrestling with the loss of her mother, fearful of taking creative risks that might reveal individuality and difference. In Salma, we meet a confident and compassionate girl who bravely becomes the first Latina girl to run for the prestigious Downeast Blueberry Queen crown. Through their friendship, readers are reminded of the power of connection as well as the possibility for communities and people to change. Upper elementary and early middle school students will cheer for both Lily and Salma, and may find parts of themselves in each of these girls as they strive for connection and significance. (KEC)

Dash
Written by Kirby Larson

Larson’s well-researched historical novel focuses on the Japanese American internment camps
established by the federal government in the wake of the Pearl Harbor bombing. In early January, 1942, protagonist Mitsi Kashino, based on the real-life Mitsi Shiraishi, hoped, “Things might be better, now that more time had passed. Maybe there’d be an end to the mean notes in her desk” (p. 1). Her family had already burned their Japanese books and scroll paintings, like their neighbors. But Mitsi’s closest friends continue to reject her because of her heritage, while community shops and restaurants put up signs refusing service. Soon, Mitsi and her family are relocated to Camp Harmony. Unable to bring along her dog Dash, Mitsi leaves him in the care of Mrs. Bowker, a sympathetic European American neighbor. Mitsi’s family confronts challenges and indignities as they adjust to camp life. Her correspondence with Dash, courtesy of Mrs. Bowker and one of Mitsi’s former classmates, becomes a ray of hope and a lifeline to the world she left behind. The courage, compassion, and resiliency of family and friends allow Mitsi to grow and mature despite her limited freedom. Larson does not attempt to simplify the internment experience; as such, she offers a partially happy ending, concluding the book while Mitsi remains imprisoned. While Larson herself is not Japanese American, the novel was written with personal memorabilia made available to her from Mitsi Shiraishi’s family. (MAC)

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